

/SEASONAL TEAPOTS/

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Since its invention in antiquity, pottery has served utilitarian purpose. The practical use had always determined its appearance in terms of form and surface treatment. By the middle of the 20th century, the functional aspect in clay works declined. Many ceramic artists turned to non-functional forms; they not only used clay as an artistic media, but also took pottery form as their expression as well. Among those forms, the teapot is one of the most prevalent.

During the past four years that I have been involved with clay, my basic form has alternated between the vessel and the teapot, both in functional and non-functional pieces. By the beginning of my last year in the MFA program, I recognized that my work had already been dominated by the teapot form. Therefore, I started to do my research on teapot subject seriously.

The research begins with the history of teapot and its exportation to other countries. The second part is a study on contemporary ceramic artists who use teapot forms as their expressions. The last part examines the development of my own works which deal with "seasonal subject", using the teapot as expressive form.

## YIXING TEAPOTS

The origin of tea preparation, like most of the world's great discoveries, remains unknown. One theory is that it was discovered 4000 years ago, when, by chance, tea leaves fell into a pot containing boiling water. Since then, a pleasant beverage known as tea has existed. Coincidentally, the use of low-fired pottery called earthenware was also discovered around 1500 B.C. Thus, earthenware cups were the first utensils being used in serving tea.

Since pottery, at that time, was considered utilitarian ware, practical use should determine its appearance. The teapot was invented in the 16th century by one of the monks of Jinsha temple at Nanshan, near Yixing, a center of stoneware pots production in China. These Jinsha monks had long been known for their tea connoisseurship and it was quite natural that a special pot should be made for the exclusive purpose of brewing tea. It is said that one day a monk took a lump of clay, kneaded it into a ball, spooned out the clay from the center and thus produced a hollow vessel. After fitting a spout, handle, cover and knob, he fired the vessel in a factory kiln near the temple. Later on, this factory became known throughout the country and through the export trade, to other countries, for its famous Yixing teapots.

A beautiful teapot that will not pour is useless, so function became a major concern for potters. The pot had to be well rounded, comfortable to hold, with a curving handle, a short, straight, pointed

spout that poured without dribbling, and a pleasant, easy to grip, good fitting lid. (Fig.1) Although a globular body was the most common shape, Yixing teapots may have many shapes.



*Fig.1*  
A globular body Yixing  
teapot. Mid-nineteenth  
century.  
H 4 3/4", W 6 1/4".

They can be round, square, angular, flat, level, lofty, low, big or small, egg-like... On examination of their quality, some will be found to be warm and gentle like old gentlemen, some brave as heroes, some stylish as men of letters, beautiful as pretty girls, lovely as children, small as pygmies, simple and slow like old men, jaunty and fanciful as fairies, austere as philosophers, others are unworldly like Buddhist priests, connoisseurs and collectors must love them in their hearts before one can discuss with them such delights. (K.S. Lo, The Stonewares of Yixing from the Ming Period to the Present Day, Sotheby's Publications, Hong Kong University Press, 1986, p.30)

The various shapes of Yixing teapots can be classified into three main groups.

1. Shapes borrowed from archaic bronze, jade, and porcelain pots. (Fig.2)

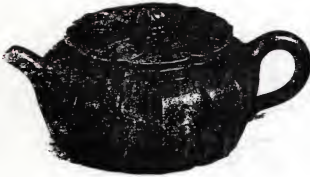


*Fig.2*  
Teapot shape borrowed from  
archaic bronze. Early  
twentieth century.  
H 4 3/4", W 9 1/4".

2. Shapes borrowed from nature, such as flowers, plants and  
fruits; this group can be subdivided into two sections;  
naturalistic, (Fig.3) and impressionistic. (Fig.4)



*Fig.3*  
Naturalistic teapot, pumpkin  
shape. Early eighteenth  
century.  
H 3 3/4", W 7".



*Fig.4*  
*Impressionistic teapot.*  
*Chrysanthemum shape. Early*  
*eighteenth century.*  
*H 2 1/4", W 5 3/8".*

3. Geometric shapes, such as spherical, cylindrical, cubic and rectangular. (Fig.5)



*Fig.5*  
*Geometric teapot. Early*  
*eighteenth century.*  
*H 8 1/2", W 7 3/4".*

Another issue about Yixing teapots that should be considered is size. Because the tea ritual could be both personal (for one or two persons), and communal (from two to six or more), small and large teapots were being used according to the occasions.



Due to the exportation of Yixing pots, they became one of the everyday utensils of the Far East, Southeast Asia, Middle East, and Europe. By the 16th century, the teapot shape had become almost universal, a form whose function could be identified at a glance.

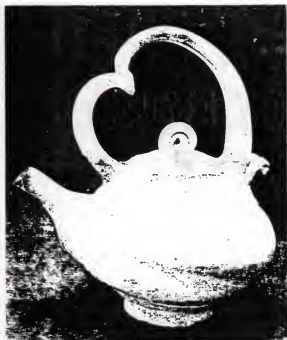
## CONTEMPORARY TEAPOTS

Ultimately, the common thread that connects tea connoisseurs everywhere is the teapot within which the union of tea leaves and water occurs. Since the exportation of the Yixing teapot in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a teapot shape has become almost universal utilitarian ware for coffee and tea rituals. Due to its original utility, the teapot is a form intended to be handled and moved through space. The balance between the importance of filling and emptying is almost equal. (The teapot implies a foreword motion and this illusion is carried out in its form). Today a functional teapot remains an expression of utility through its traditional format, with slight changes of form and surface treatment.

| But, what is interesting is that the focus of the teapot has changed, from function to expression. It is the concept itself, the way specific designs are translated, that continues to fascinate many potters. Each year more artists are using teapots as vehicles for expressing their ideas and enthusiasms. And due to the fact that artists go their own ways, trying to distinguish themselves from others, there are enormous variations of contemporary teapots. | But still, if we spend some time and try to sort it out, we will begin to see that there are groups of artists with similar lines of thought, as follows;

1. Design as subject matter. Teapot forms are one of the most difficult exercises in clay. The relationship between the

body, lid, handle and spout has endless possibilities and combinations. The joining of these dissimilar elements, the issue of balance relative to the placement of the handle and spout, the fact that the teapot actually should pour without spilling or dripping, combine to create a technical challenge. It is the dialogue within the teapot, between form and function, as well as surface design and pattern, that becomes the main content for many artists such as Lee Rexrode who stated that, "limitations imposed by function do not inhibit creativity or personal expression." (Rexrode, Lee. "Thoughts on Function." Cermics Monthly, March 1989, p.37-42) On the other hand, a teapot is an expression of design that is based on the functional aspect. (Fig.6, 7)



*Fig.6  
Stoneware teapot with  
complex pulled handle, soda-  
fired by Lee Rexroad.  
H 13".*



*Fig.7*  
*Porcelain teapot, thrown and*  
*altered, slip decoration by*  
*Tim Kemp.*  
*H 8".*

2. Denial of function. The single most important new element that appears in recent decades is a conscious, intentional denial of function within the formal framework of the teapot. Many devices are introduced to deny function, for example;

- a. using inappropriate size.
- b. cutting, slashing, ripping or even poking through the surface.
- c. using solid clay without an opening to an interior space. (Fig.8)
- d. assembling of found object. (Fig.9)
- e. unusable glazing.

These genuine non-functional teapots are intended only to be visualized as works of art. Among the artists employ this approach are Robert Hudson, Stan Welsh and Brad Schwieger.



*Fig.8*  
Salted-fired stoneware, solid  
clay by Brad Schwieger.  
H 17".



*Fig.9*  
Tea Pot slip-cast porcelain,  
brushed and airbrushed with  
underglazes and china paint,  
with quartz crystal and cork  
additions by Robert Hudson.  
H 8 1/4".

3. Cultural and historical content. For many artists, a handmade teapot must represent more than merely a place to brew tea.

It is a cultural link between the East and West. It expresses a simple drama between respect for the past and a personal view of the present. With a sense of homage, an imitation of the scale, formats, colors and textures of historical artifacts are combined with contemporary civilization's imagery. A good example is Richard Notkin's Yixing teapot series. (Fig.10, 11)



*Fig.10*  
*"Hexagonal Curbside Teapot*  
*(Variation 18)-Yixing Series"*  
*by Richard Notkin.*  
*H 5".*



*Fig.11*  
*"Pitcher Relies," gerstley*  
*borate-fluxed at cone 10 by*  
*Patrick Crabb.*  
*H 10".*

4. Naturalism. Often, natural environment becomes a main source of inspiration for artists. Fruits and vegetables as well as

animal and human forms appear as subject matter and decorative elements. The wide range of organic imagery from purely realistic nature to abstraction is used as body, handle, spout and lid to represent a living in harmony with nature. (Fig.12)



*Fig.12  
"Cantaloupe Teapot," slip-  
cast porcelain, with thrown  
and hand-built additions,  
high and low-fired glazes,  
luster by Karen Aumann.  
H 11".*

5. Constructivism. The Memphis movement was born in the winter of 1980-81 when several Milan-based architects decided to "redefine forms for objects and architecture." This movement has turned many artists' interests toward constructive clay work in today's Post-modern decade. Planning and sketching is made before an angular, sharp-edged teapot is created by joining geometric forms together. This technique contributes an architectural appearance without references to a natural environment. The constructivist teapot, in contrast to a naturalistic approach, speaks of mankind as the one who controls nature. Peter Shire and

Harris Deller are artists who belong to this category. (Fig.13, 14)

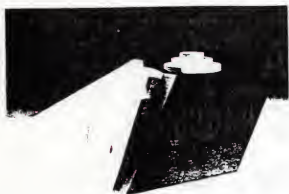


Fig.13  
*"Parallelogram Teapot," slab-built sculpture, with polychrome underglazes by Peter Shire.  
H 12".*

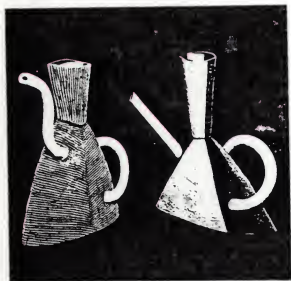


Fig.14  
*"Suppressed T-Pot with Checked Back" and "Suppressed T-Pot Positive and Negative with Ram," slab-built porcelain by Harris Deller.  
H 12".*

6. Stylization. For the artist who does not let himself be drawn in by the world around him, the teapot takes on a personal meaning as the process of finding the right visual combination takes shape through an inner dialogue. It becomes a representation of personal symbols and certain forms that



reappear in the creative attempt. The stylized teapot form is used as a point of departure for sculptural concerns as in Mayer Shacter's and Belinda Gabryk's works. (Fig.15)



*Fig.15  
"Titania", thrown and  
extruded porcelain, with  
incising and lusters, multiple  
fired by Mayer Shater.  
H 12".*

The fact that there are so many different approaches to making a teapot has opened doors for artists to go in an individual directions, looking for their own statements. The teapot has an enormous vocabulary for communication. It is a language that is used to speak about something which cannot be described by the spoken or written word.

## SEASONAL TEAPOTS

Since antiquity, the common material, clay, has been used to produce craft and art by potters and artists in every civilization. The enduring process of clay work demands great effort and care. Forming, glazing and firing are endless lessons to be learned and explored; therefore, a responsive reaction to each process is crucial in order to develop a personal statement. Thus, my works are reflections of the experiences, successes, and failures that I have been subjected to since my earliest years.

Thailand, my native country, located on the Southeast Asia Peninsula, has a culture which is a blending of the Far Eastern and the Southern Asia civilizations. The Thais, which are thought of as easy-going, relaxed and simple, reflect their ways of living in pottery by its simplicity of form and surface treatment. (fig.16) Thai pottery



*Fig.16*  
*Thai Stoneware Bowl. Wheel-*  
*thrown. 14th to 15th*  
*century.*  
*H 6".*

is influenced by Chinese pottery, i.e. symmetrical, static, and perfectly balanced forms are used in their basic containers. Consequently, Thai pottery for everyday utensils shows this national attitude towards clay.

My first response to clay in 1979 at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, as an architectural and industrial design student was to produce strictly functional ware using the wheel-throwing method, according to the departmental curriculum. It was then that I recognized the relationship between my personality and the potter's way of working.

While trying to set up a ceramics studio at home in 1983, I also attended Chinese painting course under Prof. Lim Eow, an eminent painter of charming brushwork. (fig.17) I hoped to coordinate his

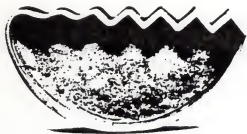


Fig.17  
"Bamboo in the Wind,"  
watercolor by Prof. Lim Eow.  
1983.  
H 1'6", W 1'8".

painting techniques with my wheel-thrown forms. Traditionally, a Chinese painting student is taught to paint the master's way, technically

and aesthetically. It is a lifetime experience. Students have to be able to paint as the master before they are free to go on their own. And gradually, after years of practice, they might be able to develop their personal styles. By this traditional way of art education, the students' destiny is always clear and secure. And for the culture, the continuous development of traditions revive.

In 1984, I arrived at the University of Kansas as an undergraduate student in ceramics. In the United States, the attitude toward clay was totally different from my former training. Arts and crafts have dividing lines and definitions. Wheel-thrown functional pottery is identified as craft, and a hand-built, non-functional one is defined as the work of art. Because of my experience with modeling architectural form out of cardboard in Thailand, I treated my hand-built, non-functional clay forms that way. A hard clay slab was cut out and joined with another by slip clay to form a pure geometric, sharp edged vessel. (Fig.18) During my first year there, design and



*Fig.18*  
*"Transition," slab-built, raku*  
*by Surojana Sethabutra.*  
*1985.*  
*H 2", W 10".*

planning were crucial to master perfect proportional forms. The vessel, itself, had to turn out exactly like I had planned, without an

emotional response.

By the beginning of my second year, Shoji Hamada, the Japanese potter, was introduced in one of my classes. His works and concepts were overwhelming. Based on the nature of common materials found in the location, simplicity of form and pattern, his pottery was a subtle expression of tangible art that raised utility as subject matter.

(fig.19) Once again, I began to make functional pottery, using



*Fig.19*  
*Rectangular Bottle, press-*  
*moulded, Tenmoku by Shoji*  
*Hamada. 1966.*  
*H 9".*

wheel-thrown method. It was then that a sense of naturalism was established as the foundation for my work.

After two years in the United States, I spent my summer vacation in Thailand and had a chance to visit the northern part of my country. I found the arts of the hill tribal people who live there the most impressive. Their high creativity is reflected in their art forms

in terms of geometrical styles of ornamentation, distinctness of motifs, emblematic schemes, and a clear order of patterns. Moreover, their broad, humble conception of life also reflected in the direct submission to handicraft and utility. (Fig 20) For them, art and life could not be



*Fig.20  
Hilltribal woman weaving  
skirt with intricate pattern.*

separated. Ideally, that is the way art should be in every society. Simplicity, truth, patience, and a sense of timelessness are the spiritual values to which we should aspire.

Coincidentally, a semester following my return to the University of Kansas, Pablo Picasso, the Spanish painter, became my main influence. From the art of tribesmen, isolated people of Africa, Oceania, and Ancient Iberia, Picasso was the very first artist who recognized the instinctive, the natural, and the mystical as essentially human. Instantly, the geometric angularity in forms, earthy tones brought his turning point to primitivism, which developed into the most important conceptual innovation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art known as Cubism. (Fig.21)



*Fig.21*  
*Nudes jug by Pablo Picasso.*  
 1948.  
 H 1'2".

The development of my works, up to this point, had moved from utilitarian wheel-thrown wares to non-functional forms. (Fig.22)



*Fig.22*  
*"Primitive Fish," coil-built,*  
*raku by Surojana*  
*Sethabutra. 1986.*  
 W 1'8".

Pots of various themes based on my natural surroundings, such as, plants, animals and the landscape were made from the mixture of semi-soft and hard slabs. It was the first time that my work had clear

statement and meaning other than the search for a visually pleasant form.

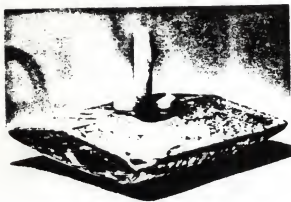
My education at the University of Kansas ended quite abruptly when I saw a poster on the studio door displaying Prof. Yoshiro Ikeda's teapot. (Fig.23) At once, I decided to study under his



*Fig.23*  
*Tea Pot, earthenware by*  
*Prof. Yoshiro Ikeda. 1986.*  
*H 1'9".*

instruction at Kansas State University. My first semester as a graduate student started with one simple form made out of semi-soft slab. To tell the truth, I got the idea from a piece of wood found on the way home from school. On making pots based on this simple natural form, I found the changing of positions and proportions made a great deal of difference within the same format. Also I found, changing the surface treatment, colors and textures gave a totally different visual effect. (Fig.24)



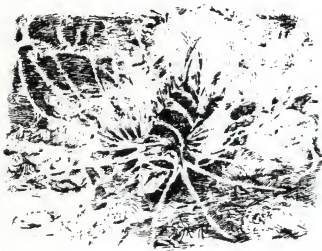


*Fig.24*  
*"Coffee and Tea Pot," slab-*  
*built, oxidation fired at cone*  
*01 by Surojana Sethabutra.*  
*1987.*  
*H 8".*

This simple geometric form led me to a new subject matter, the sea, and this fish teapot. (Fig.25) Many studies and sketches on thesea subject followed. (Fig.26, 27) But the problem that was raised



*Fig.25*  
*"Stingray," slab-built,*  
*oxidation fired at cone 01 by*  
*Surojana Sethabutra. 1987.*  
*W 1'6".*



*Fig.26*  
*"Deep Sea Fish," ink on*  
*paper by Surojana*  
*Sethabutra. 1987.*  
*H 6", W 8".*



*Fig.27*  
*"Deep Sea Shrimp," charcoal*  
*on paper. by Surojana*  
*Sethabutra. 1987.*  
*H 10", W 14".*

from this theme was a technical one, the slab method did not fit these ideas. Thus, a coil technique, a method that had been used since antiquity, was introduced. Even though the coil method had never appealed to me, it now freed me from a slab roller, a clay cutter, a ruler, and a flat surface. Besides, I was freed from sharp edged, pure geometric forms which I had been trying to get away from for a long time. "Coil", a more intuitive technique, permitted me to achieve organic forms with minimal problems in the firing. (Fig.28)



*Fig.28*  
*"Mysterious Being," coil-*  
*built, oxidation fired at cone*  
*01 by Surojana Sethabutra.*  
*1987.*  
*H 6".*

However, these sea related subjects did not hold my interest for long. The visual representation of nature without a personal statement had never been able to compete with nature itself. Furthermore, living in Kansas, I was in the middle of a country, thousands of miles from the sea. I felt my statements should be something about my surroundings, something I see and feel everyday.

Thailand has a tropical climate which is constant all year-round. On the contrary, the four seasons in Kansas effected me a great deal. I felt I need to do the seasonal theme before returning to my home land. In Kansas, every season, people change their clothes according to the weather. Thick and thin, loose and tight, smooth and rough, all these elements provided infinite combinations. The clothed figure became my main concern. In the beginning, I used a perceptual approach (Fig.29), but ended up with a conceptual one, when I realized



*Fig.29*  
*"Summer in Thailand," coil-*  
*built, sagger fired by*  
*Surojana Sethabuttra. 1988.*  
*H 6".*

that an ordinary vessel form was, indeed, a figure. Potters name each part of the vessel the way we label parts of the body - neck, shoulder, body, foot, etc. Whatever I made would always be the figure and now I had freedom to use a geometric format with movement within the work. This marked the return to geometric form again, a loose geometric form this time. (Fig.30)

Not only had my subject matter been changed, but also the firing and glazing techniques as well. From oxidation firing in electric kiln at cone 01 to reduction firing in a sagger that had been put in gas kiln. This primitive firing technique brought richness and depth to the surface, and, at the same time, gave a natural, lively appearance. My works were alive!



*Fig.30  
"Winter Sweater," coil-built,  
sagger fired by Surojana  
Sethabutra. 1988.  
H 6".*

During the past four years, my basic forms alternated between vessels and teapots. It was by the beginning of my last year in the

MFA program when I realized that the teapot form was beginning to dominate my work. There might be many reasons that this form is so important in my work. First of all, the teapot form, itself, consists of many dissimilar elements - body, lid, handle, and spout. The combination of these elements gives endless expressive possibilities. Secondly, teapot implies a forward motion and movement through space, a mythical quality. And thirdly, according to Chinese symbology, the opening covered by the lid may represent the female, while the phallic spout clearly indicates the male principle. Both are inherent in any teapot. It might be a reflection of my childhood life that grew up among five boys. As a child, I always wanted to be one of them, physically and mentally, in order to have more freedom, which I later realized was an invalid idea.

At the beginning of the seasonal subject, using teapot as a form of expression, I was concerned with merely the content. Season, to me, involves in many things, i.e. nature, activity, experience, etc. And the teapot form was a vehicle to express these contents. The form, by itself, was utilizable. An only indication against the functional aspect was glazes. Local clay, ashes, and egg shells became the main ingredients of the unusable surface treatment. It is also challenging to see how much I can accept the subtle qualities that make up these natural substances. (Fig.31)

The recent teapot form, at this moment, is moving toward the non-functional aspect. By trying to make a dice form teapot, I found the handle, lid, and spout were unnecessary. These elements which



*Fig.31*  
*"Camouflage in Dirty Snow,"*  
*coil-built, oxidation fired at*  
*cone 04 by Surojana*  
*Sethabutra. 1988.*  
*H 6".*

used to indicate how this form is utilized, now, are obscured, broken, or missing as if to question the viewers how much they can accept this form as a teapot. (Fig.32) Although the subsequent teapots are



*Fig.32*  
*"Summer Game No.1," coil-*  
*built, oxidation fired at cone*  
*06 by Surojana Sethabutra.*  
*1989.*  
*H 10".*

designed for the particular season of the year such as winter teapot (Fig.33) and summer teapot (Fig.34), they still maintain this concept.

These recent works, to me, are truly non-functional teapots about seasonal utilitarian teapots.



*Fig.33*  
*"Winter Teapot," coil-built,*  
*oxidation fired at cone 06 by*  
*Surojana Sethabutra. 1989.*  
*H 12".*



*Fig.34*  
*"Summer Teapot," coil-built,*  
*oxidation fired at cone 06 by*  
*Surojana Sethabutra. 1989.*  
*H 14".*

Five years of experience in clay have broadened my horizon a great deal. From the pure geometric design of my architectural background, to the functional ware of Shoji Hamada, to the spiritual arts of the hilltribal people, to the representational sea subject, to the loose geometric figure, and finally the seasonal teapot, each period of changes were integrated into my work, consciously, and subconsciously. I only hope that the eclecticism in concept will be fulfilled in my future work.



## CONCLUSION

From the historical view that teapots, and other utilitarian utensils, were invented to serve human needs has come the indication that function is part of the power of the pottery forms. Today, many ceramic artists are using the structural, formal and historical aspects of the container form as the vehicle for expressive cultural content. There are numerous pieces of clay works that have the primary inspiration, homage to another works that preceded them. In a sense, these clay works are expressions, that rooted in the truth of experience, of pots about other pots, of non-functional vessels about functional pottery. Therefore, these clay works are invented to serve human needs for nourishment, as well as freedom, to expand the boundaries of our hearts, souls and minds.

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SEASONAL TEAPOTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Ultimately, the common thread that connects tea connoisseurs everywhere is the teapot within which the union of tea leaves and water occurs. The teapot was invented in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by one of the monks of Jinsha temple at Nanshan, near Yixing, a center of stoneware pots production in China. Later, this factory became known throughout the country and through the export trade, to other countries, for its famous Yixing teapots.

Since the exportation of the Yixing teapot in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a teapot become universal utilitarian ware for coffee and tea rituals. Today, a functional teapot remains an expression of utility through its traditional form, with slight changes of shape and surface treatment. But, what is interesting is that the focus of the teapot has changed from function to expression. Each year, more artists are using teapots as vehicles for expressing their ideas.

My recent clay works deal with the seasonal subject, using the teapot form as my expression, are reflections of my experiences, successes, and failures that I have been subjected to since my earliest years. Started with pure geometric design from my architectural background, to the functional ware of Shoji Hamada, to the spiritual arts of the hilltribal people, to the representational sea subject, to the loose geometric figure, and ended with seasonal teapot, each period of changes were integrated into my works, consciously, and sub-consciously. Up to this point, teapot is an explicit form of an eclecticism in concept.